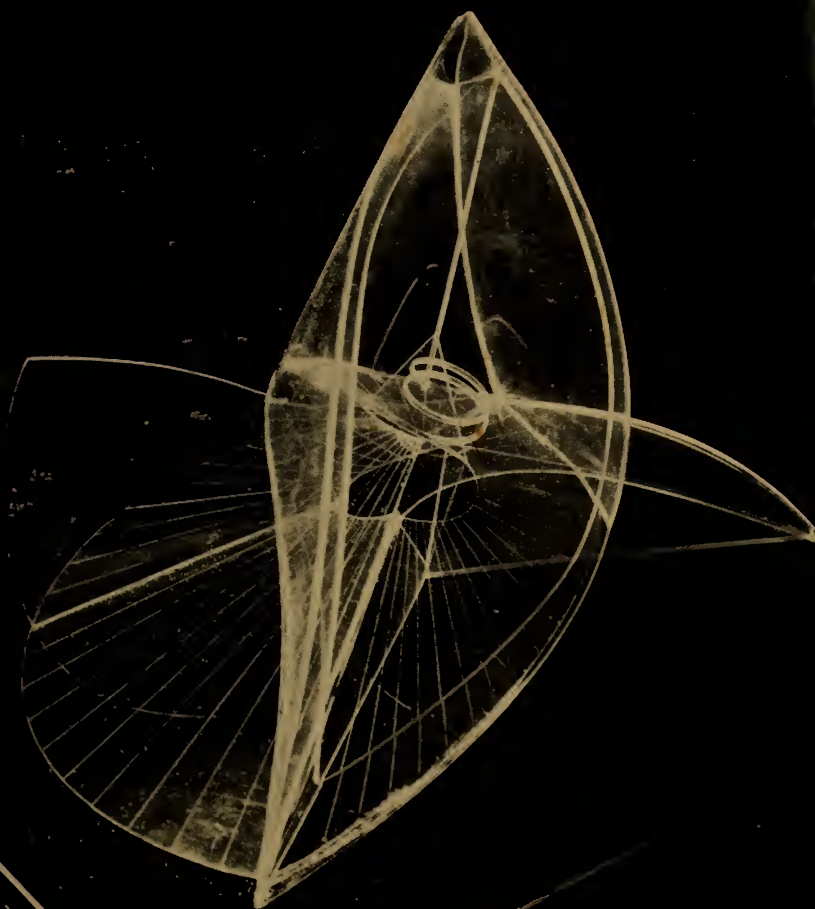


● *Three Lectures* on  
**MODERN ART**

KATHERINE S. DREIER • JAMES J. SWEENEY • NAUM GABO



COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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## THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

By KATHERINE S. DREIER  
JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY  
NAUM GABO

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These lectures by three brilliant leaders in Modern Art were delivered at Yale University under the auspices of the Thomas Rutherford Trowbridge Art Lecture Foundation.

These three lectures deal with the founding of the Société Anonyme; Museum of Modern Art; 1920, which was organized by Katherine S. Dreier, Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray to bring clarity and understanding to the confusion which the many new forms of expression in art brought over by the Armory Exhibition in 1913 had caused.

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On cover "Construction in Space: Spiral Theme", by Gabo, now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

ndation





*Three Lectures on Modern Art*



ZWEI WELTEN by KATHERINE S. DREIER  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme, Yale University Art Gallery*

# Three Lectures On Modern Art

*"Intrinsic Significance" in Modern Art*

By

KATHERINE S. DREIER

*Former Trustee of the Collection of  
The Société Anonyme—Museum of Modern Art: 1920*

*Modern Art and Tradition*

By

JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY

*A Retrospective View of Constructive Art*

By

NAUM GABO

*Three Lectures held at Yale University under the auspices of  
The Thomas Rutherford Trowbridge Art Lecture Foundation  
1948*

Foreword by

DEAN CHARLES SAWYER

*School of Fine Arts, Yale University*

and

*Director: Division of the Arts*



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## *Foreword*

IN THE ARTS, as in Science, it remains for a comparatively small group of pioneer experimenters to pave the way for new advances in new directions in the creative process. Seldom has the significance of these pioneers been recognized during their period of maximum creative activity. Once values (commercial as well as aesthetic) have been established and accepted, the learned vie with each other for the credit of discovering and of justifying and rationalizing their new enthusiasms. The creative act in criticism and in collecting, however, is the discovery of those hidden aesthetic values which, in escaping the limitations of contemporary taste, establish a different pattern for the future. We should honor more than we do those collectors and critics who have detected the importance of the pioneer artists and have paved the way for their wider acceptance and understanding in our own time.

The modern movement, which had its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has now attained the respectability that comes with advanced age and has attracted to its interpretation and defense an impressive army of Boswells. Its bibliography is now as weighty as it is still in many instances obscure. Isn't it time to pay tribute to that small group of pioneer artists—collectors—critics who saw the great potentialities of nonrepresentational art before this welter of words arose to becloud its purpose on the one hand and to justify verbally its existence on the other? The farsightedness of these pioneers, as seen in the pictures

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

they created and collected, is of primary importance to us today for it is on the visual evidence rather than on verbal rationalization that the ultimate survival value of these art forms will be judged.

Yale University is indebted to the Société Anonyme and to its founders Katherine S. Dreier and Marcel Duchamp for the privilege of acquiring and preserving one of the first important collections of nonrepresentational art to be assembled in this country. We pay tribute to them and to the artists with whom they were associated for courage and a sense of adventure during a period when these qualities were less acceptable in the world of art than they are today. Without the pioneer exhibitions and other activities which Miss Dreier and her associates sponsored in the 1920's, the favorable response to the extraordinary activity of the Museum of Modern Art a decade later would scarcely have been possible. Without the nucleus of the collections which Miss Dreier acquired and assembled, the growth of modern collections in America would have been much slower and public acceptance and response consequently retarded. In the light of continued public hostility to forms of art which many still find incomprehensible, it is easy to forget how greatly the number of its defenders and supporters has grown during the past twenty-five years.

CHARLES H. SAWYER

*Dean: School of Fine Arts*  
and

*Director: Division of the Arts*

## *Table of Contents*

	<i>Page</i>
Foreword by DEAN CHARLES SAWYER.....	v
“Intrinsic Significance” in Modern Art By KATHERINE S. DREIER.....	1
Modern Art and Tradition By JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY .....	31
A Retrospective View of Constructive Art By NAUM GABO .....	63
INDEX .....	89



## *List of Illustrations*

<i>Figure</i>	<i>Page</i>
KATHERINE S. DREIER: <i>Zwei Welten</i> .....	Frontispiece
EL GRECO: <i>The Nativity</i> : Metropolitan Museum N. Y. ....	18
KATHERINE S. DREIER: Structural Lines underlying The Nativity by El Greco .....	19
KANDINSKY: <i>The Blue Circle</i> : Museum of Non- Objective Art, N. Y. ....	23
GIOTTO: <i>Pieta</i> : Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy.....	25
CAMPENDONK: <i>The Red Cat</i> : Collection of the So- ciété Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery.....	27
LEGER: <i>Composition No. 7</i> : Collection of the So- ciété Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery.....	28
NAUM GABO: <i>Model for Monument for an Obser- vatory</i> : Private Collection .....	29
MARCEL DUCHAMP: <i>Revolving Glass at Rest</i> : Col- lection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery .....	42
MARCEL DUCHAMP: <i>Revolving Glass in Motion</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale Univer- sity Art Gallery .....	43
NAUM GABO: <i>Model of a Column</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gal- lery .....	46
MONDRIAN: <i>Fox Trot</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery.....	52
JUAN GRIS: <i>Abstract Composition</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gal- lery .....	53

JACQUES VILLON: <i>Dejeuner</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery.....	55
JOAN MIRO: <i>Le Renversement</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery.....	56
PAUL KLEE: <i>The King of All Insects</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery .....	57
NAUM GABO: <i>Sphere Theme</i> : Private Collection.....	59
PEVSNER: <i>Monument for an Airport</i> : Private Collection .....	60
PEVSNER: <i>The Dancer</i> : Collection of the Société Anonyme: Yale University Art Gallery .....	61

"INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE"  
IN MODERN ART

The Trowbridge Lecture: Yale University Art Gallery  
March 5th, 1948

*by* KATHERINE S. DREIER





## 1913—THE ARMORY SHOW!

That is more than a third of a Century. A long time for an Exhibition to be remembered—and yet everyone interested in Art, whether as collector, student or artist, knows of it.

What happened that this exhibition should have made such a lasting impression? It was because a whole new World of Art was revealed there—an art which belonged to our twentieth century and not to the Renaissance or even to the “Impressionists”!

It was a large exhibition. Paintings from America, France and England, from Holland and Switzerland—from Germany, Russia and Sweden. Over a thousand paintings, sculpture, drawings and the various mediums of black and white could be studied—all forms of art—from the accepted to the rejected.

Europe was seething with new ideas and new forms in art and fortunately for us here in America there were two men who had been greatly aroused by this new stimulus to the eye. Arthur B. Davies, the painter, then at the height of his fame in America, and the brilliant Irish lawyer, John Quinn, together conceived the idea of bring-

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

ing over all these new expressions in Art. To accomplish this Mr. Quinn first spent almost a year at Washington persuading Congress to remove all duty from all countries on original works of art. Until then France was the only country with a low tariff on her Art, for she had succeeded to win a trade-agreement with our country where the French duty on our pork was balanced with our duty on French Art. This arrangement left a deep impress on our American culture.

The Armory Show opened February 1913, just 35 years ago! The new ideas and forms were so foreign to most people's vision that they did the easiest thing, which was to accuse the artists of charlatanism—especially those who had broken up the surface through cubic forms and were called cubists. It is here that we owe a great deal to the intelligent discussions which appeared in the then existing—Century Magazine—of which the late Frank Crownshield at the time was Art-Director.

We of today look upon Art with totally different eyes from those of 35 years ago, because our eyes have grown accustomed to a larger conception of vision. It is not only the physical eye which sees, but the mind or inner-eye. Few of us are conscious of the change which has taken place within all of us. No one today would think of an 'Impressionist' painting as being difficult to see

## "INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART

and yet I have lived long enough to have experienced one of Child Hassam's paintings of a "Haystack" being hung upside down in an exhibition in Boston, while one of Monet's paintings of a similar subject met with the same treatment here in New York! To many of the people in the '90's the 'Impressionist' paintings were very difficult to visualize, for they were accustomed to such minute details that this innovation of painting "En plein-Air" especially seeking the moment in the sunlight, which eliminates all detail, caused a confusion it is hard for us to realize today. Through Mary Cassatt, a young American painter in Paris, the paintings by Manet were especially brought to America where they were bought, for she was the sister of the President of the Pennsylvania Railroad and had many rich and influential friends who saw through her eyes, the great contribution the Impressionists were making, especially through their color in shadow. I am speaking here from recollection—not from historical data.

This all happened in the last half of the nineteenth century and since then no new forms of art or new expressions of art had entered our art world. But the stream of art flows on and must constantly be renewed by fresh waters not to become stagnant. I was, therefore, especially interested in this Exhibition since I had just returned

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

from a three years' stay in Europe and had brought back a beautiful little Van Gogh, the first, as far as I know, owned by an American, though Mr. Van Horn of Canada had already added some to his famous collection. My little book on Van Gogh, the translation of the *Recollection* by his sister, Madame du Quesne-Van Gogh was then being published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company of Boston. It may also interest Yale students to know that I was invited by Professor Christoph Schwab, then Head-Librarian at Yale, to speak in his home on Van Gogh and his contribution to Art. This also was 35 years ago!!

You can see that I was, therefore, tremendously interested, as were many others, in studying these new forms of Art which were being shown at the Armory Show—for they had a quality of aliveness—of belonging to this century. They released an inner tension which was of tremendous importance, for at last the bonds had been broken which bound the artist to the past. This bondage had been a devastating force—especially the attitude so prevalent at the time and still in existence today, that Art had reached its climax with the Renaissance which climax had never been repeated. Yet here was a group of men of many nations, strong enough to assert their own individual expression. It was a great experience!

## "INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART

One can easily understand, therefore, why after twenty years of stagnation the cry of "charlatanism" went up. It seemed to me the only way to check on the truth of this accusation was to meet the artists personally, which I did. When I saw the price they were willing to pay to retain their freedom to paint their vision, which price certainly did not conform to our idea of the "American Standard of Life", I recognized that they were stirred by deep conviction to give expression to their ideas in Art which belonged to the century in which they were living.

After the Armory Show there appeared at first a great many small galleries, as well as small magazines. But as time went on, the novelty wore off, and the small galleries and magazines vanished. It then seemed as if New York would again sink back into a commonplace self-satisfaction. To those of us who had recognized that the new forms of art were giving expression to the new ideas which were stirring the century and were being developed along with mechanical inventions, it seemed a tragedy. It was then that Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and I decided in 1920 to establish a modest center with a reference library, where people could come and study seriously good examples of this new form in art. Thus, the Société Anonyme Museum of Modern Art was born.



### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

Since our desire was to promote art and not our own personalities, Man Ray conceived the amusing title of calling it the Société Anonyme, which is the French for 'incorporated', and as we incorporated, we became Incorporated Incorporated. This brought out the humor which we felt belonged to the modern expression, and we fortunately had a friend and brilliant lawyer, Edmund Mooney, whose sense of humor was equal to our own. Few people have realized what an important part humor played in all those early years before the dealers took up this new form of art. Our attitude was, that we also had a right to exist and so, we took as our emblem, the head of a laughing ass to show that we, too, could laugh at ourselves.

When I think of the anger which still continues towards us I am amazed. There are always people who wish to kill us off and so, from time to time, learned or amusing books have been written as to why we are degenerates and why we should be annihilated. In 1934 Thomas Craven, the well-known Art Critic, brought out his Book—Modern Art—. He condemned us and was hailed by the blind with enthusiasm. The winter of 1947, an English interior decorator, T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, working in New York and California, brought out a book called—Mona Lisa's Mustache—which again tries to do away

## "INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART

with us, taking for its title one of Duchamp's devastating diatribes against the sheeplike following of the 'oh's' and 'ah's' regarding a work of art. Mr. Gibbings refers to it in his book as a painting by Marcel Duchamp, as if any artist, especially with the brilliancy and wit of a Duchamp, would spend hours copying Leonardo's famous painting, only to mock it at the end, when a photograph would far better serve the purpose. What surprises me is not only the joy with which this book has been accepted, but also the seriousness with which it is regarded, for Mr. Gibbings' inaccuracies as well as distortions of quotations have been brought out by Stuart Davis in the radio program—Author Meets the Critics—and by Margaret Miller in her review of the book in the—*Magazine of Art*—. What shocked me more than his attack on us was his attack on Madame Blavatsky, and how was it possible for a firm of the standing of Alfred A. Knopf to have printed on the flyleaf of the cover, "the sinister influence of Madame Blavatsky". Madame Blavatsky, who died in 1891 formed the Theosophical Society and was one of the great women of the last century. This movement, whose aim was towards international understanding and the brotherhood of man had three tenets:

First—to establish a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of man;

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

Second—to promote the study of comparative religion, philosophy and sciences;

Third—to make a systematic investigation into the mystic potentialities of life and matter, or what is termed “occultism”: to investigate the unexplored laws of nature and the power latent in man.

Why should a young Englishman in 1947 speak so contemptuously of one of the great philosophical movements of our times, which anyone who has ever traveled through the East values, especially since it has always had such a large following in England? It apparently annoyed him that there could be in existence laws which appear to the uninitiated as miracles, or as he calls it, “black magic”. It reminded me of a conversation I had with a clergyman who rejected the Miracles of Christ because he could not accomplish them himself; whereupon I reminded him that neither could he play the piano like Paderewsky which contribution he recognized. It is strange how people want to limit others if they cannot personally conceive how a thing is done or do not know the laws which operate it. There is no such thing as a miracle to the initiated; it is simply the lack of knowing the higher physical laws under which they operate which gives that impression. It does seem a bit stupid to take that atti-



## "INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART

tude in a Century which has developed the radio and the aeroplane.

Mr. Gibbings evidently did not recognize that for the first time in the history of Art, subjects could be expressed through Art forms which formerly had only been attempted through words. Among these are the various philosophic thoughts and reactions to new inventions which are the foundation of so much of our life today. As an example I will only mention the saving of time which was made physically possible, first through the telegraph, then through the telephone, and now through the aeroplane and radio. It was this philosophic thought of the Past, Present and Future, merging into one—which the Italian Futurists used. For that reason I do not think the movement is dead, though it is lying fallow.

To those not interested in philosophy this trend in modern paintings must often appear meaningless, and my attitude has always been that if what you want to say can be said through Realistic Forms, why use Abstract ones? Mr. Gibbings despises magic, but I wonder whether even Mr. Gibbings has not experienced the magic of beauty of a rare moonlight or starry night, or the enchantment of golden autumn leaves reflected in a dark pool, or the magic of spring—if so, then why call it sinister? And why condemn artists who

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

respond to the magic of beauty or are deeply interested in philosophy or the brotherhood of man? It seems very odd to me. It is so easy to jeer when one cannot or will not understand, but time always rights things. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, but in 1919 she was canonized, and so the world goes on.

I am, therefore, very much surprised at the people who are so concerned over this book—Mona Lisa's Mustache—. I presume in 1962 another book will appear condemning us—I am sure the Byzantine painters felt toward Giotto and his followers exactly as the followers of Thomas Craven or Mr. Gibbings feel towards us. You have Byzantine painters even to this day, but it has become a craft. It is Giotto and his followers on which our western Art rests.

The tragedy is that many people in authority cannot see the Art of a painting, even when it is expressed in realistic form and therefore, naturally they cannot see it when it is expressed in the new forms. Hence they find it difficult to discriminate between the creative Abstract painters and the so-called 'camp-followers'. That is why they scold so. When it comes down to rock bottom they cannot see what makes the Art of a painting—regardless whether it is Realistic or Abstract in form.

We, as a nation in general, have a strange atti-

"INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART  
tude towards art, based, it seems to me, on our unconscious Dadaistic-approach to life. I refer to the remark—I don't know anything about Art but I know what I like!!!!

We also think that anyone with eyes can judge—not realizing that it is the use of the combination of the physical eye with the so-called inner or mind's eye which discriminates. This is based on knowledge as to what constitutes Art. It is our lack of judgment, it seems to me, which makes us publicly exhibit our children's paintings — not realizing that what they achieve, they achieve unconsciously, whereas Art must be done consciously to be Art, even when it is influenced by the subconscious. We even let children select pictures from a museum, for a children's exhibition, oblivious of the fact that a child should be guided and taught to appreciate a picture. This attitude that Art should be something the people understand and like, which is Russia's attitude today, Hitler's in the past and President Truman's now—shows a tragic lack of understanding of the functions of Art and the laws governing it. Suppose we took this attitude toward religion or science—where would it lead us?

I think that one of our difficulties is that we are not sufficiently conscious of why Art exists. That Art is a Force *within man* to develop man. Most people take it more lightly, and look upon

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

Art as something to please them. But though in the whole scale of art this should be included—it is not the main purpose of Art—for as I have said before it is a developing Force in man.

Because Art is a Force within man—it is constantly in the making. It is fluid—not static or a state of development reached by man—but a developing Force in man. Its real purpose is to stimulate our energies and increase our vision of Life. And because we are all so different it takes many various forms of Art to achieve this.

That is why our modern group felt that we, too, had a right to exist, which is quite different from the picture which Mr. Gibbins draws of us. We also stimulated the energies and enlarged the vision of those who were conscious of the contributions of our century, and wanted it expressed in Art. Many have called our form of Art experimental, because it was new and different—but we feel that we have achieved something.

It is a mistake not to differentiate between the Art which proceeds from the creative forces in man and those expressions of Art—whether in painting, sculpture or the industrial arts, which copies the past and holds its own mainly through excellent technique.

I was deeply impressed when I studied the technique of Chinese Art under the late Kunpah King in Peking, to find that the function of Art

## “INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE” IN MODERN ART

to the Chinese—was to free the spirit of man and to invigorate and enlarge his vision. They did not even look upon portraiture as a form of Art, which form is of the greatest interest to most Americans. Does it show our predominant interest in our fellow man, or does it show a lack of imagination in Art?

I am constantly being asked—what is the contribution to Art which the so-called modern movement in Art has made? It is only since the modern movement in Art has made its appearance that there again has been the impact to go back to the Fundamentals in Art and to become once more conscious that Art is a visual experience which does something to one through the combination of the physical and inner eye. The Impressionists, through their concentration on the problem of light lost sight of the construction, which is especially felt in the works of their followers. It is the reawakened interest in the fundamental construction of Art which has always existed and is one of the great contributions which modern Art has given back to the world. For under the super-imposed picture which is what most people only see, because they do not look deep enough, you will find this construction underlying all important works of Art. Besides this they again emphasized that an artist expresses his emotions through his work and so El Greco



### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

again came into his own. The elongated figures which still disturb many people and are ascribed to a physical defect in his eye were used to express ecstasy. For as he grew older and became more and more interested in the ecstasy of religious fervor he expressed it through his elongated figures. One need only to reverse the picture to realize that one cannot express ecstasy through squat figures or even through very normal proportions. It is a state of mind which does not belong to the average human being.

It is very important that people realize that Art cannot be appreciated through the intellect alone for it is a visual experience. As I said before it is the union of the physical and inner-eye, which enables us to perceive the meaning beneath the surface. Our mental expression is influenced by our reaction. If we are interested our attention is much stronger. Our greatest danger in America of not understanding Art is that so much of Art Appreciation or the History of Art is taught through books and photographs—both in black and white and in color, which is purely an intellectual approach. Art must be studied through actual examples—for as I have said before it is a visual experience and no reproduction can take the place of the original and no color reproduction gives the actual color of an original painting. I often wonder whether this is sufficiently recog-

## “INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE” IN MODERN ART

nized and taught. Therefore, the students studying at Yale are indeed fortunate to have a museum where they can study actual examples of many of the periods in their study of Art History or Art Appreciation or while studying at the School of Art.

It is well to remember while studying Art, that there exist two Schools of Thought current in relation to Art. The one School of Thought believes that Art has developed through the ages—and the second School of Thought to which most of the Modern Group belong—believe that there is only—ART—no matter when it was produced. There is no development in that which is Art. It is well to think this through clearly, and decide which School of Thought one wants to follow—for the effect on judgment in Art is very different.

In 1923 Picasso expressed it extremely well in an interview with De Zayas which Alfred Barr has reprinted in his book—Picasso: 50 Years of His Art. To quote: “to me there is no past or future in Art. If a work cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all. The Art of the Greeks, the Egyptians, the great painters who lived at other times, is not an Art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was. Art does not evolve of itself, the ideas of people change and with them their mode of expression”.

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

It is strange how the first School of Thought persists—for one does not find it in literature and the moment one translates it into that realm of Art one sees clearly its absurdity. For no one would claim that Shakespeare was greater than Sophocles or Aeschylus or that Wordsworth or Browning were greater than Dante. Neither would they say that literature had reached its height or climax at the time of Dante or Shakespeare and had receded never again to reach such heights. One is too conscious that—"the ideas of people change and their mode of expression"—to make any such statement.

To quote further from Picasso's interview: "They speak of naturalism in opposition to modern painting. I would like to know whether anyone has ever seen a natural work of Art. Nature and Art being two different things cannot be the same thing. Through Art we express our conception of what Nature is not. Velasquez left us his idea of the people of his epoch. Undoubtedly they were very different from what he painted them . . . . From the painters of the originals, the primitives, whose work is obviously different from Nature down to those artists who like David, Ingres and even Bouguereau, believed in painting nature as it is—art has always been Art and not nature. And from the point of view of Art there are no concrete or abstract forms but only forms



## "INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART

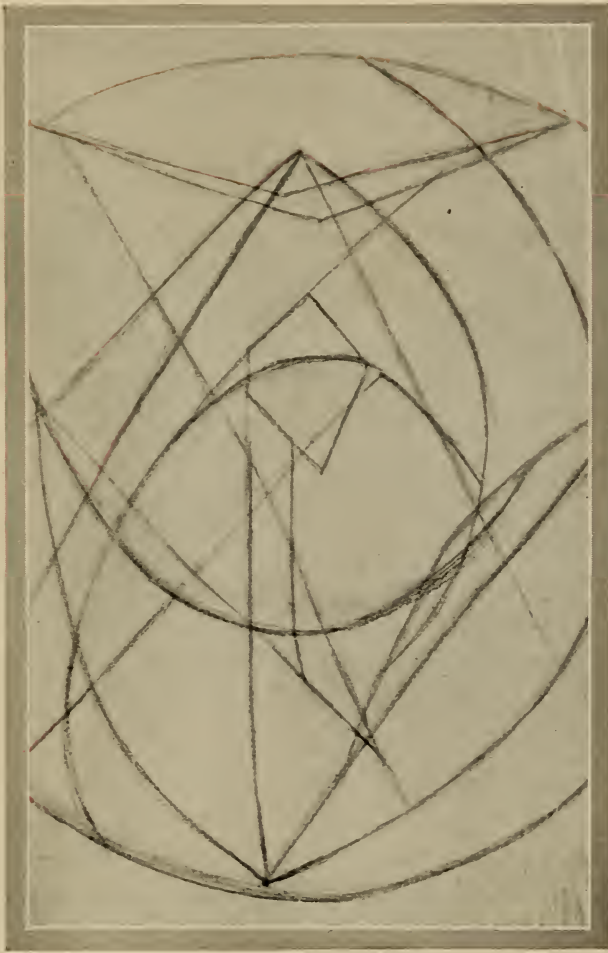
which are more or less convincing lies." Here I believe that the word—illusion—would make for greater clarity. But to continue—"Cubism is no different from any other School of painting. The same principle and the same elements are common to all. The fact that Cubism has not been understood for a long time and that even today there are people who cannot see anything in it means nothing. I do not read English, an English book is a blank to me. This does not mean that the English language does not exist and why should I blame anybody else but myself if I cannot understand what I know nothing about."

I think Picasso is right. There are many problems. How many realize the problem of creating the illusion of a three dimensional world on a two dimensional plane? Neither do they realize that whereas in architecture you are dealing with—Form in Space—in painting you are dealing with Division of Space. In music this division of space is a division of Time. The same notes in different division of Time create totally different effects. And the same is true in division of Space. Through this division of Space we create what we want to say. If we want depth we create it either through linear perspective or through color, which many of the Renaissance painters did also by throwing their background into the distance through the use of blue. But since the



*The Nativity* by EL GRECO, 1548-1614  
*Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum, N. Y.*

(See p. 20)



Structural Lines Underlying The Nativity by El Greco  
drawn by

KATHERINE S. DREIER, 1926.

(See p. 20)

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

Impressionists there has been an increase in the use of color even to the use of color-perspective, as Kandinsky uses it without any linear perspective, simply through the weight and values of colors chosen, which recede or come forward as one desires.

I shall show through a few illustrations one or two points I brought out in this lecture. Let us first study the construction underlying the old masters. See illustration P. 18.

Take the pattern as shown here and see the completion of the arch formed by the foliage to the left.

The beautiful curve from the support of the arch down to the left figure, to the light and curve of the drapery of the shepherd kneeling along his bent knee to the crook of the staff.

The column which supports the whole picture and is continued through the use of light and form of the Madonna.

Take the bottom curve. All these lines explain just why the details come where they do. Or take the beautiful angle from the head of the angel to the lamb—then up to the knee of Joseph to the light on the little figures in the distance. Or take the curve from the lamb's left side—through the knee and the back of the shepherd. The curve enclosing the Christ Child—the back of the standing shepherd—the heads—down the drape-

"INTRINSIC SIGNIFICANCE" IN MODERN ART  
ry of Joseph. Emphasizing the love of this group  
for the child.

The curious rectangle shape of light enclosing  
the child.

In the lower beautiful curve which cradles the  
child—not only in the manger, but also in the  
hearts of those adoring. This, with the other lines,  
emphasizes the religious quality of the picture.

I have called this substructure the—Invisible  
Line—which forms the beauty of the completed  
picture and explains why the accents are placed  
where they are—sometimes through light or dark  
—sometimes through the pose of a figure or  
lines of drapery—and since the day of Cezanne  
through color. It is interesting to note that El  
Greco took the problem of light which Correggio  
first introduced and added to it fluidity which  
made his figures more alive and less static. This  
fluidity was first appreciated by the moderns  
who, in turn, used it and took it further into the  
realm of the *sensation* of motion. That is why  
Duchamp's—Nude Descending the Stairs—cre-  
ated such excitement both in appreciation and in  
anger.

See illustration P. 23 — The Blue Circle — by  
Kandinsky.

Mr. Rich of the Chicago Art Institute, in his

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

article—Freedom of the Brush—which appeared in the February ‘Atlantic’—quotes Eugene Speicher as follows: “Abstraction is in every great work of Art—but it is the skeleton around which warmth and color and beauty are added. Modern Art—that is the phase you are talking about—insists on showing just the skeleton which belongs in a class-room—and not in a gallery.” But I believe that even in this black and white reproduction of Kandinsky’s painting, you can feel the “warmth, color and beauty.”

You can feel the same qualities in many of Kandinsky’s paintings which are on exhibit. In the Abstract paintings these ‘Invisible Lines’ are now done through color which is the distinct contribution of our Modern Group.

I wish I had the time to take up some of the other problems. The contribution of Modern Art to psychology through its new use of color and form; the change in the conception of Space; or the change in Rhythm and Motion; which so-called Modern Art has introduced in the realm of painting and sculpture.

We do not claim that we are better—or that the other forms of Art are inferior—but we claim that a great many new conceptions have come into our every-day world which demand new





The Blue Circle by Kandinsky: 1866-1944  
*Courtesy of the Museum of Non-Objective Art, N. Y.*  
(See p. 22)

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

forms of expression in Art. We want people to realize the contribution of each form of Art—for so only can one enjoy truly all forms of Art and need not discard any. In fact, it makes it all the more exciting to see how conceptions change, and how the different generations meet them.

In closing I want to show you four more illustrations to demonstrate an important element in Art, the element of the—Oneness—or—Unity—of a work of Art which is fundamental. The lack of this—Unity—is much more apparent in an abstract expression of Art than in one where the subject matter diverts the attention. Unity exists when each part is an integral part of the whole. Where no detail detaches itself—or an unimportant detail forces itself upon the observer to confuse the important central message of the theme.

Oneness is the opposite of monotony—for—through Oneness—the important statement or message becomes clear and decisive.

THE PIETA — by *Giotto*: 1267-1337. Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy. See illustration on P. 25.

Notice how beautifully this painting is constructed. In spite of the tragedy portrayed there is a serenity overlying the whole because of the bigness of its conception. Notice how all the lines lead the eye to the central theme. This creates the oneness





*Pieta* by GIOTTO, 1276-1336  
Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy

(See p. 24)

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

which is the opposite of monotony, and makes the important statement or message clear and decisive.

COMPOSITION No. 34—by *Fernand Leger*. Collection of the Société Anonyme, Yale University Art Gallery. See illustration on P. 28.

In this painting we have the serenity expressed in modern terms.

THE RED CAT—by *Campendonk*. Collection of the Société Anonyme, Yale University Art Gallery. See illustration on P. 27.

This illustration shows the concentration to which has been added dynamic energy.

In conclusion I want to show you

GABO'S MODEL FOR A FOUNTAIN on P. 29.

Showing the new approach in sculpture by taking—Form in Space—and adding depth to it.

Formerly sculpture was only represented by volume of an enclosed circumference of Form in Space. By adding depth through hollow forms an entirely new conception in sculpture was born.

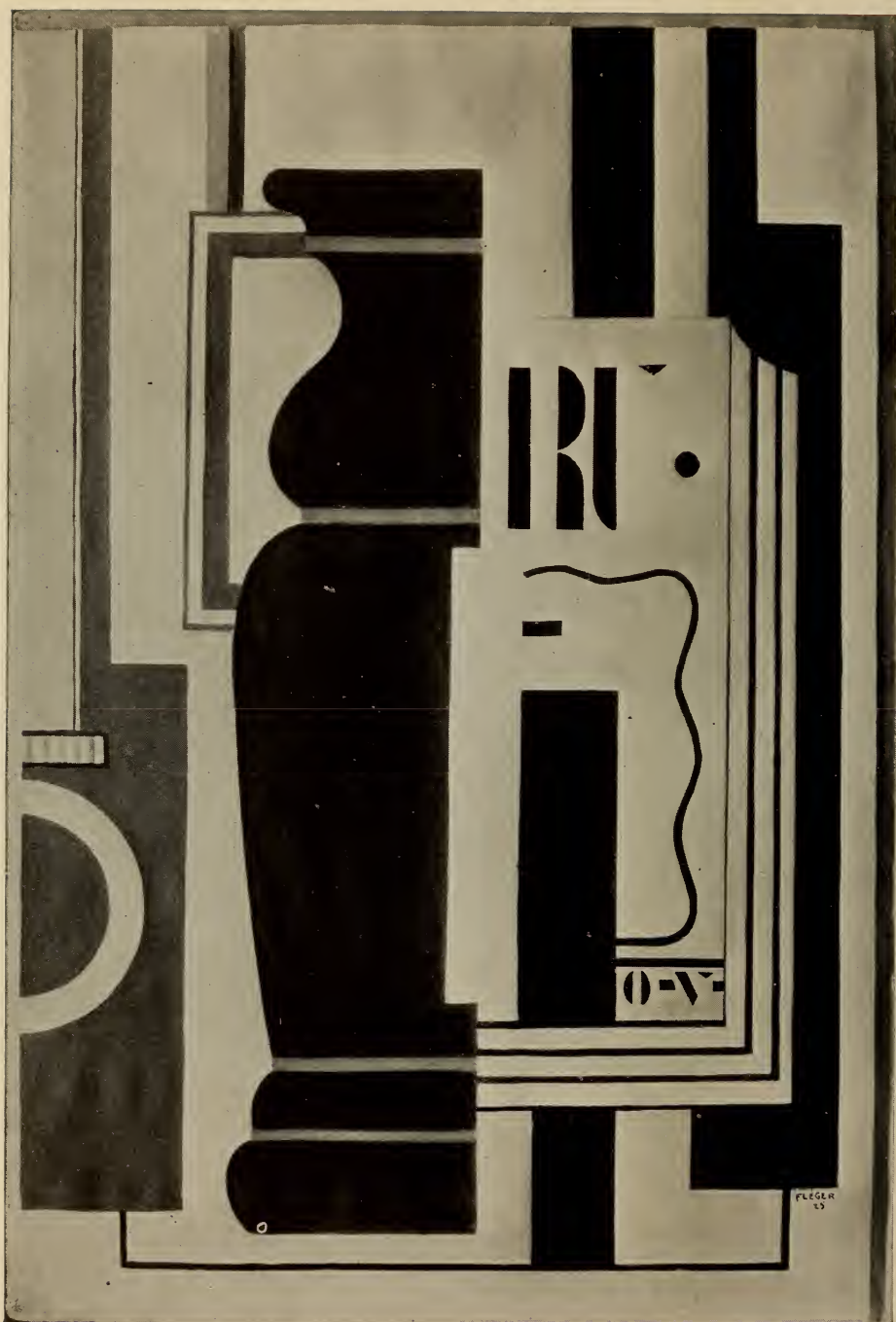
Years later Moore also took this new form of expression in sculpture which was shown at the exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1947. Pevsner, Gabo's brother, had continued his painting until 1923 when he took up these new problems in sculpture which Gabo had



The Red Cat by Campendonk: 1889—  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*

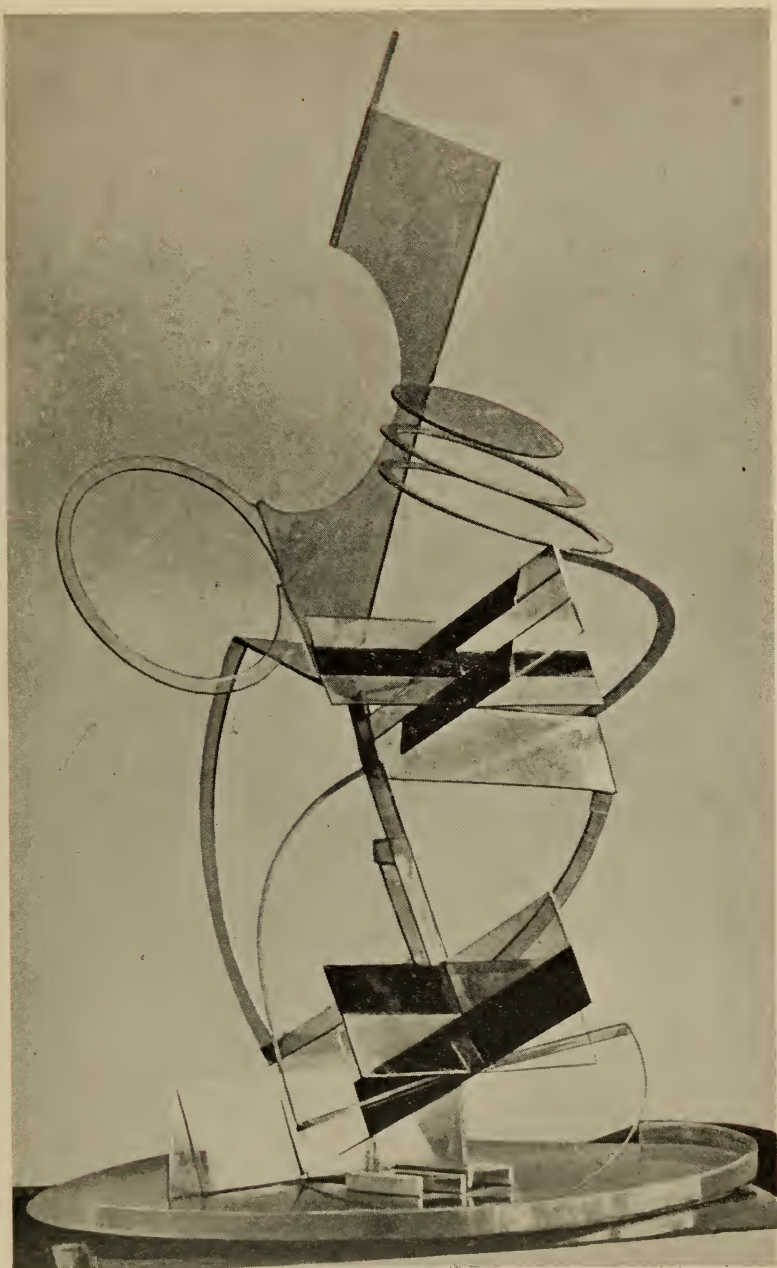
(See p. 26)





COMPOSITION No. 7 by LEGER, 1911—  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*

(See p. 26)



MODEL FOR MONUMENT FOR AN OBSERVATORY by NAUM GABO, 1890—  
*The Collection of Katherine S. Dreier*

(See p. 26)

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

introduced eight years earlier. You will notice a lyrical quality in Gabo's sculptural work which is quite unusual, and it is especially interesting to note in contrast the monumental work of his brother.

# MODERN ART AND TRADITION

The Trowbridge Lecture: Yale University Art Gallery  
March 12th, 1948

*by* JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY





Not so long ago, as I was reading Professor Hamilton's invitation to talk to you this afternoon in connection with the Société Anonyme Exhibition on the significance of a museum's possession of such a collection of Modern Art, my eye, by chance, fell on a remark by the late Logan Pearsall Smith in one of his collections of aphorisms: "How often my soul visits the National Gallery, and how seldom I go there myself."

The next moment, as if to make amends, my eye picked up another quotation; this time from the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats:

"A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains  
All that man is,  
All mere perplexities,  
The fury and the mire of human veins."

And I saw at once the direction in which my way led.

For I have long felt that that poem of Yeats, *Byzantium*,<sup>1</sup> and his earlier poem, *Sailing to Byzantium*,<sup>2</sup> are two of the most suggestive statements of the spiritual value of art in twentieth century writing.

"That is no country for old men. The young

<sup>1</sup> *The Winding Stair and other Poems*, Macmillan and Co., 1933.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tower*, Macmillan and Co., 1928.

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

In one another's arms, birds in the trees,  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish flesh or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten born and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect. . . .

“O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

“Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy emperor awake; . . .”

Those lines, from *Sailing to Byzantium*; and the closing stanza of *Byzantium*, in which the poet points to that final quality which art holds for him:

“. . . The smithies break the flood,  
The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
Marbles of the dancing floor

## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea."

To us, in a consideration of the significance of a museum's possession of a collection of works of art in the present period, Yeats' concept of the spiritual value of a work of art has a peculiar relevance. For today we need help toward breaking "the bitter furies of complexity" in a way in which it was perhaps never needed before. We are sorely in need of that reassurance that "monuments of unaging intellect" can give, and the stabilizing influence of an ingathering to "the artifice of eternity." And this is what a true work of art can do for us. We see all around us chaos and a lack of standards. Our "civilization", so called, is a mob civilization. For "the tendency of unlimited industrialism", as T. S. Eliot has written, is "to create masses of men and women—detached from tradition, alienated from religion and susceptible to suggestion: in other words a mob. And a mob will be no less a mob if it is well fed, well housed and well disciplined."

Yeats in these two poems considers the human soul in its relation to work of art; he finds that the architect and goldsmith have set up miracles of workmanship to stand in mockery of "all that man is": models of order—an order that does

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

not exist where "that sensual music" of the world makes its insistent demands. They give us examples of order amid "the perplexities, the fury and the mire of human veins."

This is perhaps the basic value that a work of art has for us. For all true works of art, like Yeats' cathedral dome, mosaic pavement and golden bird, exert a power of purgation over all blood begotten beings who come near them. A work of art combines a unity of general form with a variety in its elements. And the satisfaction that this combination gives is essentially a binding together of our responses into a unified whole, providing us a model for the organization of our emotional life and the problems of daily existence. This is what we loosely term "beauty" in a work of art.

Here, then, is one aspect of the significance of a museum's possession of such a collection of modern art as that of the Société Anonyme: the value of the individual authentic art expression for the observer:—and an important one particularly in a University environment. But this is only half the story. This would hold true of an authentic work of art of any period—not necessarily a "modern expression," nor a representative collection of modern works of art. For enlightenment on these further aspects of the question, we must look beyond the individual

## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

art work. And we are given the lead by the phrase "detached from tradition" in the statement from T. S. Eliot's description of the spiritual effects that unlimited industrialism has had on our civilization. For today, we have perhaps even more need of the assurance provided by "a sense of tradition in human expression" than for those models of organization for our emotional lives which brilliant isolated examples will provide.—Though of course a sense of sequence and of tradition can only grow out of their interrelation.

"No poet, no artist of any art," T. S. Eliot has written, "has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism."<sup>1</sup>

In other words—art as a spiritually unifying experience for man is not complete in its isolated expressions. "The poet," Eliot continues (and it holds for the painter and sculptor as well), "can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period . . . The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.”<sup>1</sup>

Tradition, therefore, is no mere antiquarian prejudice—the implication in a work of art of some pleasing archæological reconstruction. It does not consist merely in “following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes . . . Tradition is a matter of much wider significance . . . It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, . . . ; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultane-

<sup>1</sup> *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, SELECTED ESSAYS. Faber and Faber, 1932.



## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

ous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.”\*

Consequently “tradition” may be fairly said to consist not in preserving a form or a set of forms, but keeping alive an interest in the solution of contemporary problems in contemporary terms and materials. And the value of a sense of tradition afforded by art expressions amid the materialistic chaos and lack of standards of the contemporary world needs no reiteration. The added advantage of having an illustration of a living tradition in the art is available to students at a university such as Yale during one of the most critical periods of their lives and when they probably most need its reassurance, is obvious. This is perhaps the most important contribution the Société Anonyme collection of modern art—its deepest significance both to the museum and to the University.

For the lasting achievement of the artists embraced in the collection of the Société Anonyme is that they have kept tradition in the arts alive in our period—and consequently that they have kept art alive. And not only those artists, as Eliot put it of “the most distinguished reputations.” Each of

\* T. S. Eliot: *op. cit.*

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

the minor artists has had his lesser contribution to make as well. For "what happens when a new work of art is created, is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it." . , . "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them."\*\* And the artists who are represented in the Société Anonyme Collection were all trying to keep the solution of their aesthetic problems flexible and in stride with their own times—in other words to explore fresh fields of human expression, which is the true living tradition in the arts.

A French art group, L'APAM\*, has recently formulated a rather succinct description of the aims which have characterized the efforts of the more venturesome painters and sculptors of the last half century. "From the Renaissance," it states, "until the Impressionist period, painting had set itself the goal of imitating nature: the impressionists forced themselves to imitate light, the importance of which they revealed. Cézanne, from 1880 on, reacted from this dogma: he discovered that light could not imitate itself and that it ought to be expressed by means of plastic

\*\* T. S. Eliot: *op. cit.*

\* Association Populaire des Amis des Musées, in *Le Musée Vivant*, 12th year, No. 34, January, 1948.

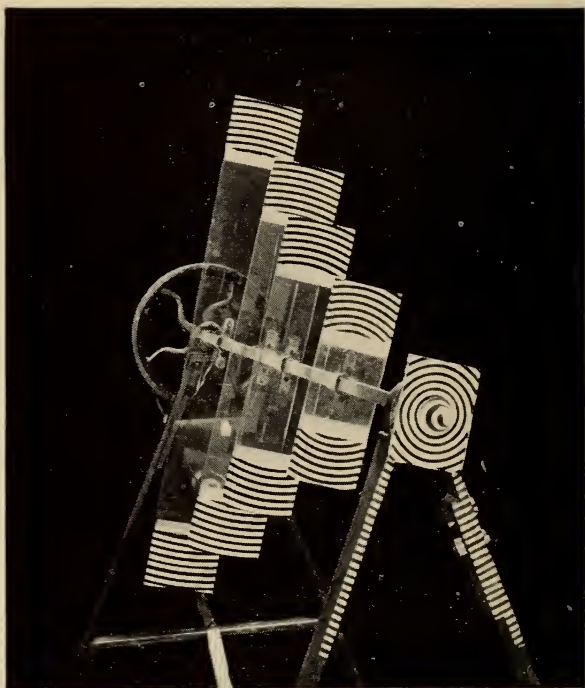
## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

(or pictorial) equivalents. Painting should not aim at imitating all that is seen, but should provide a transposition into lines and colors of all that the painter's sensation reveal to him of the world in which he has a share. All the art of to-day comes out of this discovery."

And it is interesting to consider how two of the notable leaders among those artists represented in the Société Anonyme Collection, Marcel Duchamp and Naum Gabo have picked up the tradition of Cézanne and have carried it on in widely different corners of the art field. In fact from certain ideological points of view, one could scarcely name two authentic leaders wider apart. Yet from many others, closely bound to the tradition of finding fresh solutions for fresh problems in terms and materials of their own day, we will see them following the same broad path.

On the one hand we have Duchamp, a follower of the cubists and futurists in his earlier work, who became one of the pioneers of Dada and a precursor of surrealism through his emphasis on satirical and poetic associations in the subject matter of his work. On the other, we have Gabo the constructivist, entirely uninterested in iconographic suggestions, giving all his aesthetic consideration to material effects and physical relationships.

"The great trouble with art in this country at



REVOLVING GLASS AT REST by MARCEL DUCHAMP, 1887—  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*



REVOLVING GLASS IN MOTION  
by MARCEL DUCHAMP, 1887  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

present, and apparently in France also," Duchamp said in an interview about two years ago, "is that there is no spirit of revolt—no new ideas appearing among the younger artists. They are following along the paths beaten out by their predecessors, trying to do better than their predecessors have already done. In art there is no such thing as perfection. And a creative lull occurs always when artists of a period are satisfied to pick up a predecessor's work where he dropped it and attempt to continue to do what he was doing . . .

"Art is produced by a succession of individuals expressing themselves; it is not a question of progress . . .

"During the First World War . . . I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purposes and in getting away from the physicality of painting. For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the XIXth century. I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind . . .

"In fact until the last hundred years all painting had been literary or religious; it had all been at the service of the mind. This characteristic



## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

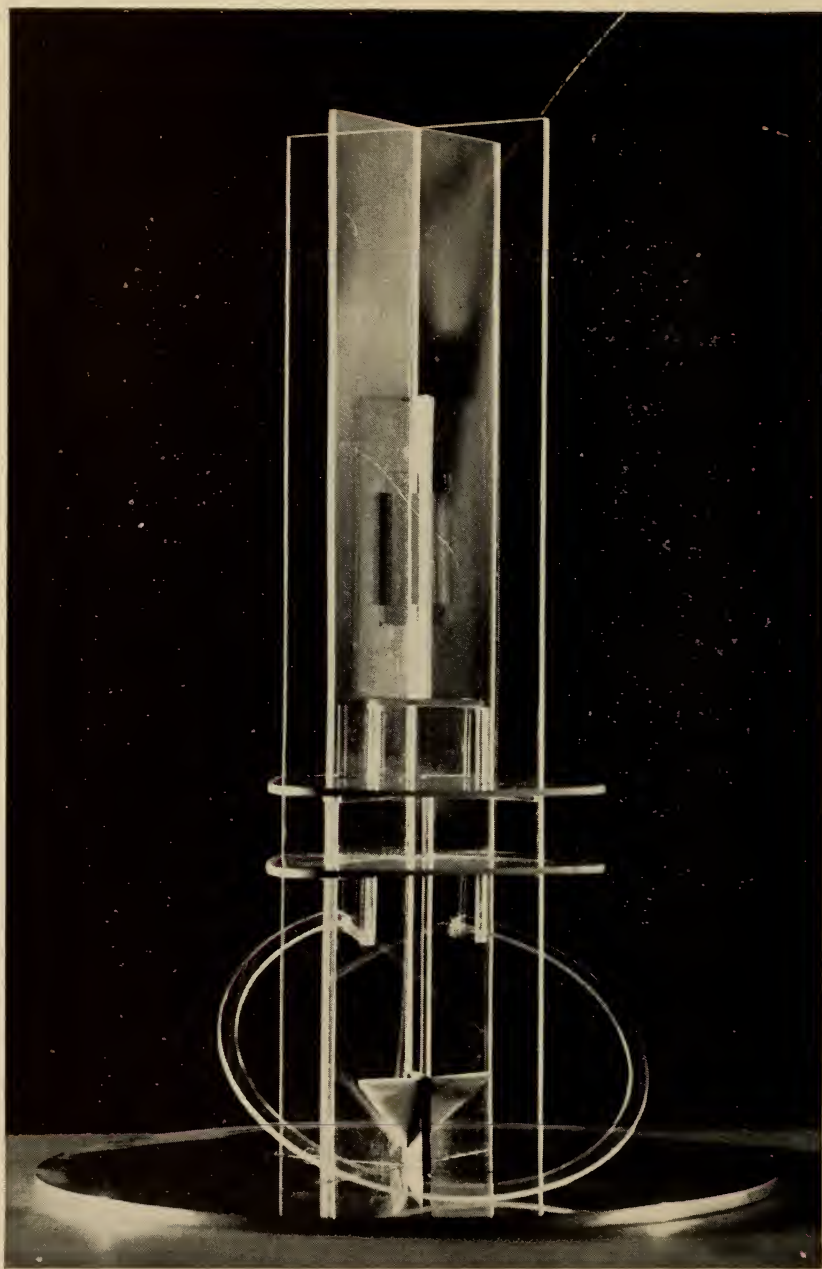
was lost little by little during the XIXth century. The more sensual appeal a painting provided,—the more animal it became,—the more highly it was regarded. It was a good thing to have had Matisse's work for the beauty it provided. Still it created a new wave of physical painting in this century, or at least fostered that tradition we inherited from the XIX century masters.

"Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude. It was intimately and consciously involved with 'literature.' It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. It was a way to get out of a state of mind—to avoid being influenced by one's environment, or the immediate past: to get away from clichés—to get free . . . Dada was very serviceable as a purgative."

That was the point of view that underlay the now familiar work of Marcel Duchamp subsequent to his famous *Nude Descending The Stairs*. And yet out of this Dada-nihilist liberation from the immediate past we find Duchamp producing a model of order for our period such as his great glass *The Bride*, a model of order that "breaks the bitter furies of complexities" for us in Yeats' sense—in the true traditional manner and as thoroughly as any works of art of our time.

To contrast with Duchamp's point of view, we have that of Naum Gabo, the constructivist





MODEL OF A COLUMN by NAUM GABO, 1890—  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*

## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

whose work is also on exhibition in your gallery with that of the other director-members of the Société Anonyme.

"We all construct the image of the world," Gabo once wrote, "as we wish it to be, and this spiritual world of ours will always be what and how we make it. It is Mankind alone that is shaping it in certain order out of a mass of incoherent and inimical realities. That is what it means to me to be Constructive."

"The reason I make constructions in transparent materials (though I do not limit myself to such materials)" Gabo explained a few weeks ago just before the opening of his exhibition with Pevsner at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "is because transparent materials give me the chance to dematerialize as much as possible my idea for the content of my work of art. By "de-materialization" I mean to make it as near as possible to a spiritual object—that is to say, an object appealing more to our minds and our feelings than to our crude physical senses.

"There is no such thing as absolute truth or falsity" Gabo believes. "Anything and everything can be both. And they are usually true or false in relation to a particular established measure, or 'module.' The tragedy of our time is that we have lost such a measure and our orientation must fail unless we establish a new one to guide

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

us. The old measures—or modules—in aesthetics, even as in ethics and in science have been worn out, used up. Not that they were false in their time; they were true. But our time and the civilization which is only beginning to be built up needs new measures or modules by which to establish a fresh point of view on values.

“We are in a chaos, temporarily, a time of transition, simply because we have not yet established a new module for living as well as for thinking. It is for that reason the picture of our civilization seems to be out of joint.

“It is the artists’ role as well as the scientists’, the philosophers’ and the poets’ to try to give as much as possible toward working out an approach to this new module or order on which to base our orientation, our value assessments and the like in the new world. The scientists are doing it. They are approaching their goal; they are very near to success. I don’t see any reason at all why we artists should not in our way do our share in that collective human task—and succeed.”

Here are the points of view of two artists of widely different schools—sprung from different racial and political backgrounds—and of divergent philosophies. And from their statements it is evident first that both have sought in the terms

## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

of their age and in the materials of their time expressions which would serve as

“monuments of unaging intellect”

—to return to W. B. Yeats words—amid the distractions of “sensual music”: models for the organization of our emotional lives that will help to

“Break the bitter furies of complexity”  
of our age;—and above all

“ . . . images that yet  
Fresh images beget.”

That is to say, works of art which are not *cul-de-sacs*, dead end expressions, but point the way for further exploration and thus foster the authentic and living tradition.

Both Duchamp and Gabo recognize the constant need of such ideal models, the reassurance given by them: a sense of continuity from the past and the promise of a continuation through the present, to the future. Both emphasize the value of this sense of continuity in the arts with T. S. Eliot “as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.” Before a work of Duchamp or Gabo it is needless to stress the fact that neither has archaeological inclinations. Yet each has (and illustrates it both in his work and his statements) that “sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and temporal together”, which makes an artist “tradi-

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

tional" in the true sense of the word. The formal integrity which they both so scrupulously observe is the timeless element in art; while the representational means and commentary, in Duchamp's case, and the material employed by Gabo give their work its temporal—in fact its contemporary character.

They both face the fact that "the material of art is never quite the same" and in a sense exploit the fact as true artists should. They both keep before them the fact that the mind of the world "is a mind which changes", but "that this change is a development that abandons nothing *en route*." And in this way by keeping themselves most authentically "traditional" they have achieved some of the freshest explorations of artistic expression in our time—in a way that no one whose tradition was "to imply some pleasing archaeological reconstruction" could have done. The present is merely measured by the past. "To conform merely would be for the new work, not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art."\*

Nor are these leaders alone. For as we have said "the main current does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations." In the work of other artists represented in the Société Anonyme Collection you have dif-

\* T. S. Eliot: *op. cit.*

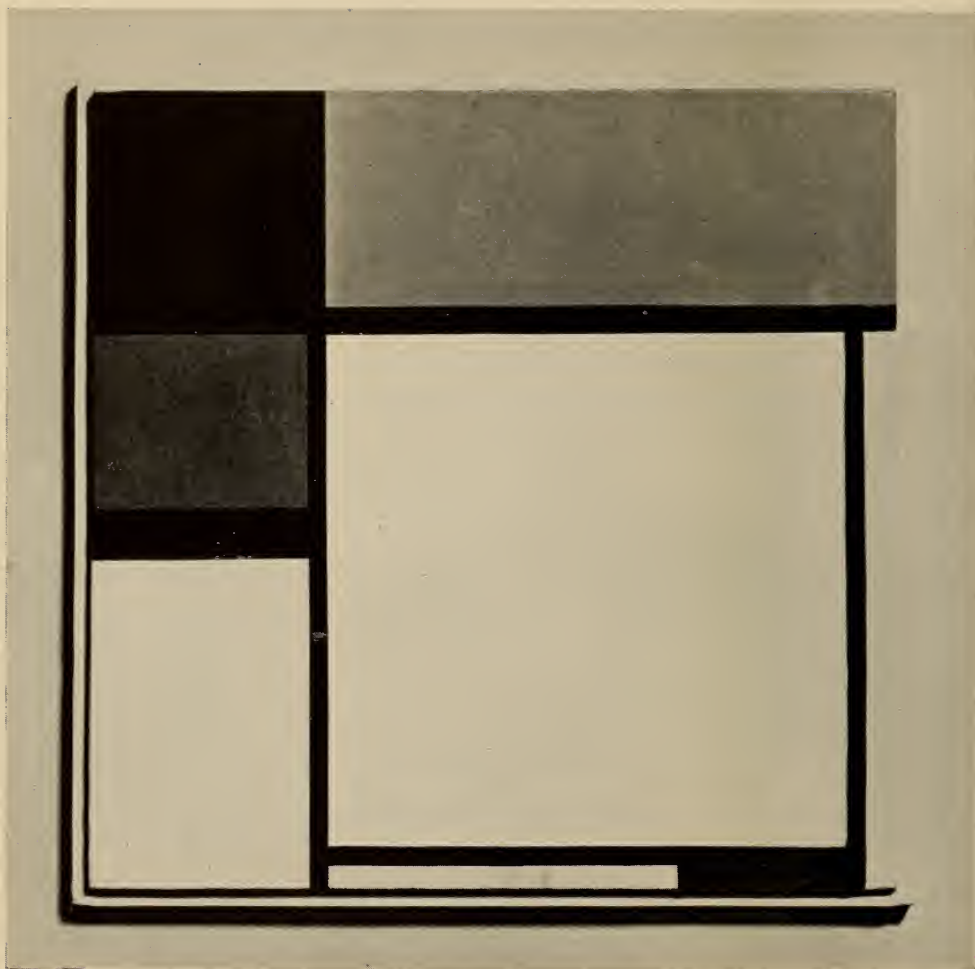


## MODERN ART AND TRADITION

ferent facets of an art expression at once as authentically contemporary and traditional as that of Duchamp or Gabo. And in them we have additional links to what has gone before and to one another. The breadth of the group including such a simple—almost peasant lyricist as Campendonk with an extreme Dadaist like Kurt Schwitters, or with an intellectualist such as Doesburg (the de Stijl colleague of Piet Mondrian) prevents the individual expressions from seeming to exist in a spiritual vacuum. Pevsner's work and that of Gabo, show how both, in their beginnings, had found their feet in the spiritual atmosphere of revolutionary Russia; the work of a fellow Russian, Kasimir Malewitch, illustrates how he, in his turn, was related to, but sprung *away from*, such Paris painters of the pre-1914 period as Fernand Léger, or Pablo Picasso . . . Or a canvas by Juan Gris beside a painting by Metzinger brings out the similarities as well as the differences of these artists who worked together with Duchamp and his brother Jacques Villon in Paris before the other war fashioning the idiom in which the authentic artists of our day were to speak to us in accents appropriate to our time.

In another corner of the group we have those artists who were content to give emotional expression primacy over a considered intellectual organization of their pictures: men such as Was-





FOX TROT by MONDRIAN, 1872-1944  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*



ABSTRACT COMPOSITION by JUAN GRIS, 1887-1927  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

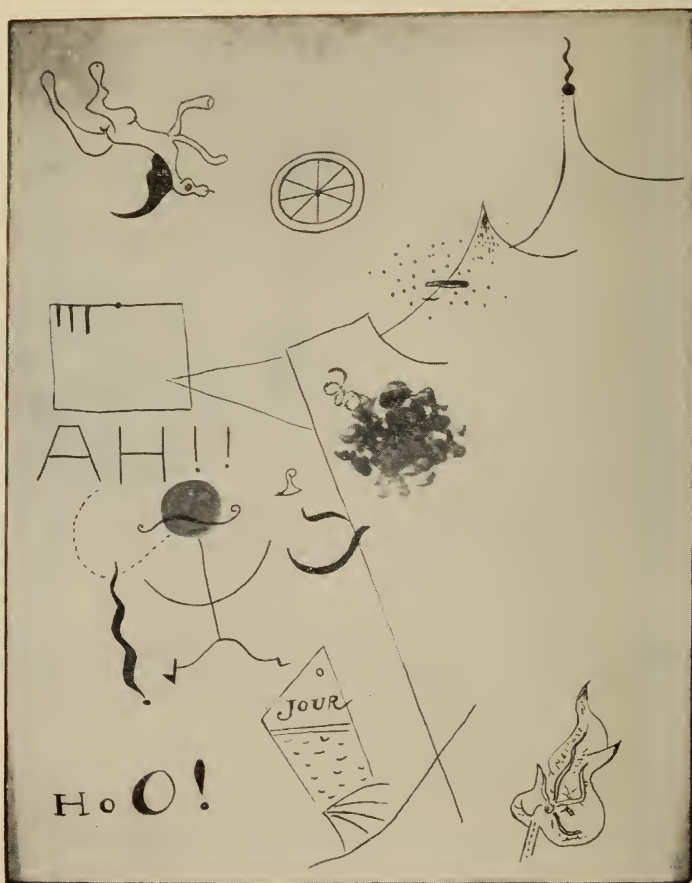
sili Kandinsky, in the years when his book "*The Art of Spiritual Harmony*" was one of the most influential art statements of the day; Paul Klee, who was happy to dream his witty intimate dreams into water colors and oils; Hans Arp, the sculptor; or Joan Miro, the Catalan peasant whose fantasies so rarely abandon the farm-yard of his birthplace at Montroig near Barcelona.

Thus, then, in the Société Anonyme Collection we have not only individual works of art of quality and timeliness, but also a corpus of spiritually related expressions illustrating the creative spirit of their time and ours. The individual works of art, through their quality and integrity, offer patterns for the emotional and spiritual organization of the observer. The corpus of such work which the collection provides serves as a concrete illustration of a living tradition in the arts. In this corpus we have a broad illustration of the variety of problems contemporary artists have faced and have sought to solve in contemporary terms and materials. And by comparing these solutions with the solutions of artists of the past we can plot to some degree the pathway that art is likely to follow to the future.

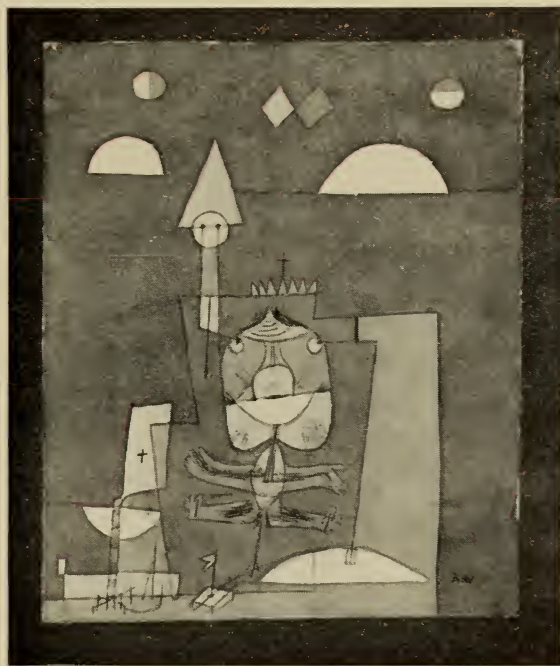
In addition to the critical and historical value of such a group we have also the psychological or spiritual assurance of achievement and continuity which can have such a penetrating value



DEJEUNER by JACQUES VILLON, 1875—  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*



LE RENVERSEMENT by JOAN MIRO, 1893—  
 Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
 Yale University Art Gallery



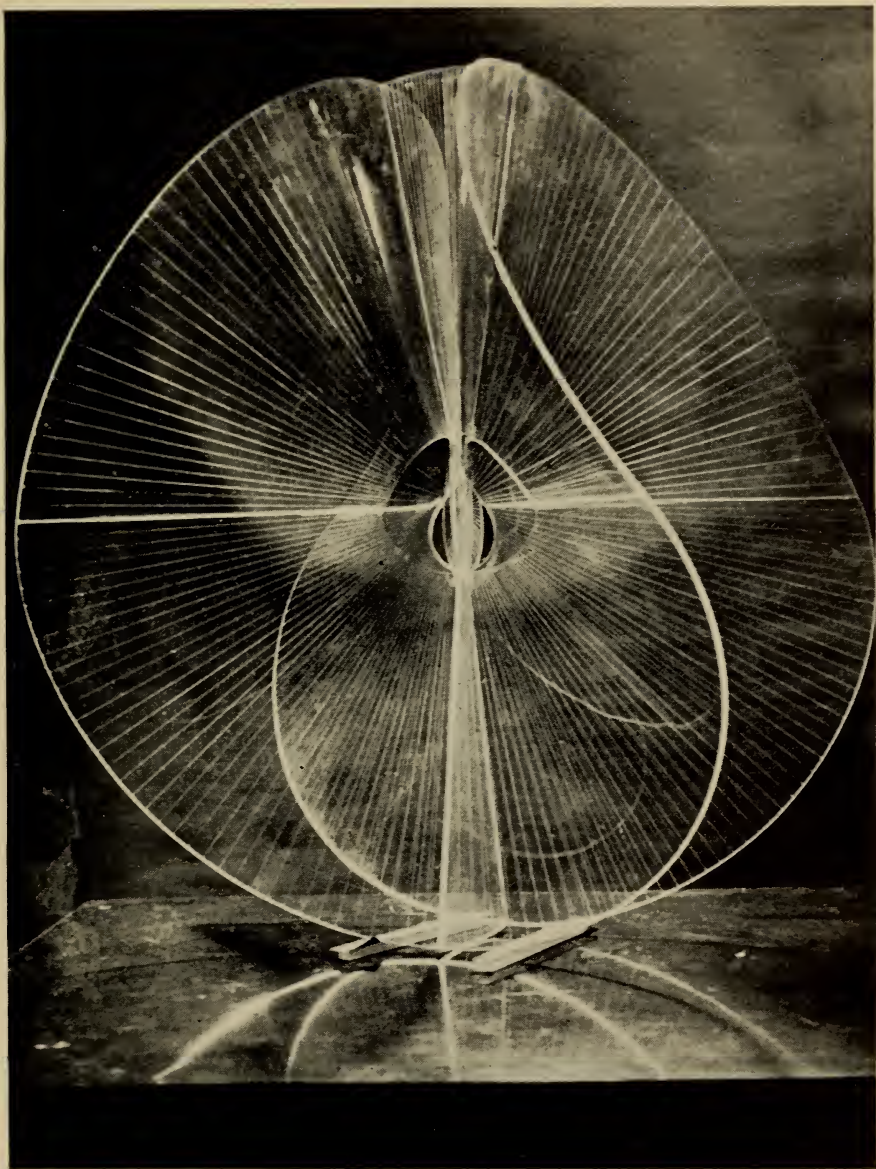
THE KING OF ALL INSECTS: by PAUL KLEE, 1879-1947  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*



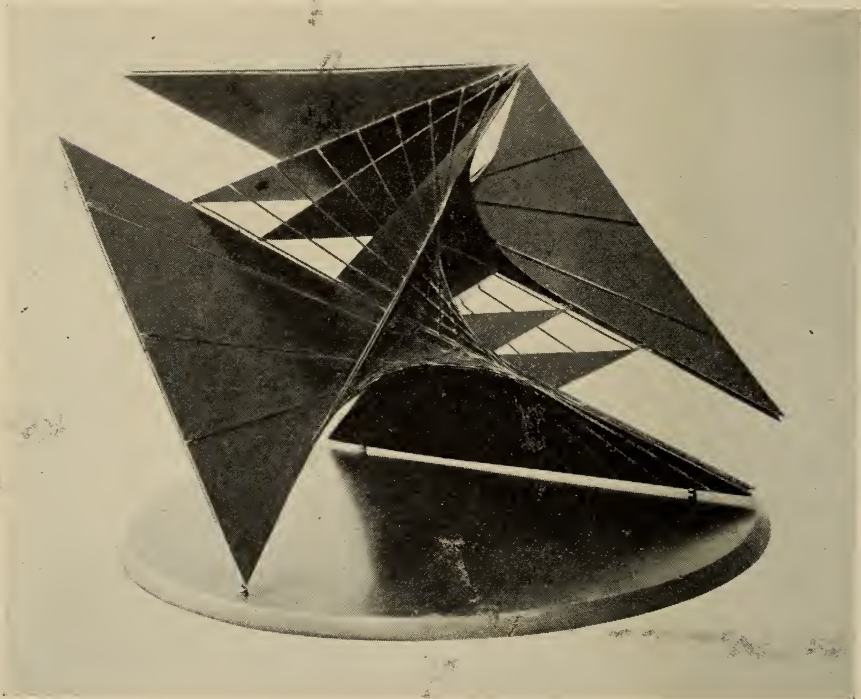
### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

in such a world of forming character as that of a University.

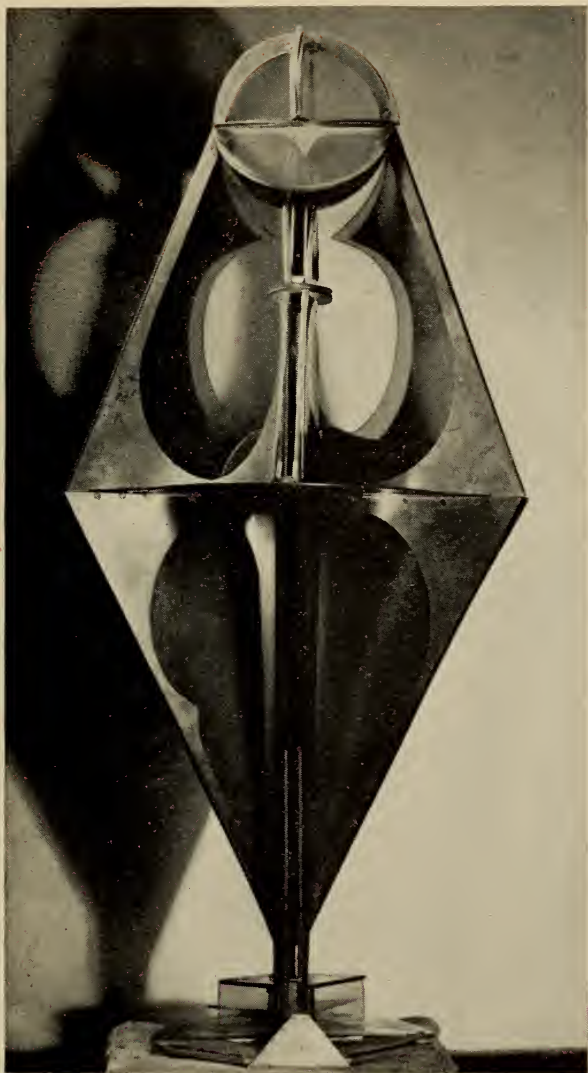
These are a few aspects of the significance of a museum's possession of such a collection of Modern Art. And, by the same token, these are a few points of our debt—that of Yale and all interested in contemporary art—to Miss Katherine Dreier for her insight, foresight and courage in bringing this collection together, to her fellow directors for fostering it and to the Société Anonyme as a body for dedicating it to such effective use in one of the great educational centers of our country.



SPHERE THEME by NAUM GABO, 1890—  
*Private Collection*



MONUMENT FOR AN AIRPORT by PEVSNER, 1886—  
*Private Collection*



THE DANCER by PEVSNER, 1886—  
*Courtesy of the Collection of the Société Anonyme,  
Yale University Art Gallery*



# ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

The Trowbridge Lecture: Yale University Art Gallery  
March 19th, 1948

*by* NAUM GABO





IT IS APPROPRIATE that on the occasion of celebrating Katherine Dreier's seventieth year and the work she has accomplished through the Société Anonyme, Museum of Modern Art, 1920, that I should have the opportunity of explaining my thoughts about the philosophy of Constructive Realism, which I have formulated through all the years of my artistic activity.

Twenty-six years ago when I exhibited my work outside of Russia, in an all Russian Exhibition in Berlin in 1922, it was Katherine Dreier who bought one of my works shown there and was the first to bring my work to this country. Since that time it has been my great privilege to consider myself among her friends and I am happy to be able to be present at this gathering and thus pay a tribute to a fellow artist and a friend whose devotion to art and unwavering adherence to our ideals had been an inspiration to all of us.

It has always been my principle to let my work speak for itself, following the maxim that a work of art does not need to be explained by its author, that it is rather the other way around, it is the author who is explained by his work of art. However, I have often been called upon to use words to supplement the mute medium of my profes-

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

sion. I confess, that I was never happy about it. My only comfort, such as it may be, is the fact that I am not the only one who is encumbered by this overwhelming duty. All artists in all times had to do it in one way or another, and my contemporaries are certainly no exception. But it may be instructive to notice the difference of methods used by the former and by the latter. When the artist of old times was challenged to justify his work, he had an easy and simple task. He lived in a stable society, tightly knitted in a pattern of a commonly accepted social, religious and moral codes; he and his society lived in accordance with a set of very well defined standards of what is good, what is bad, what is virtuous or vile, beautiful or ugly. All the artist had to do was to refer to these standards and argue that in his work he fulfilled their demands.

The artist of today, however, when called upon to justify his work finds himself confronted with a most difficult and complex problem. Here he stands in the midst of a world shattered to its very foundation, before a totally anonymous society, deprived of all measures, for evil, beauty, ugliness, etc. . . . He has no norms to refer to. He is, in fact, an abnormal subject in an abnormal society. And there are only two ways left open to him; one is the reference to his personality.

Personality is one of those things which by

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

some trick of our social disorder has been left as some sort of a little straw in the maelstrom of confused values, and many an artist is grasping that straw.

They, in justification of their work, appeal to their personality; their motto roughly amounts to this: "You are asking from me my personality—here I am;—this is how I see the world,—I, not you. You cannot judge my work, because you are not I—I paint what I see and how I see it. I paint what pleases me and you have to take it or leave it."

We have seen that more often than not this method has proved of some advantage and for a time was useful for many artists in so far as it gave them the opportunity to carry their revolt and their contempt to that very society which, having no personality of its own, yet demanded that the artist produce one.

Although I have the greatest esteem for the work these artists have done in their time, their method is not mine.

And although it would be a false humility on my part to deny to myself what is given to me by nature and what I have acquired through the experience of my life, namely, that I too have a personality, I do not hold, however, that personality alone, without its being integrated in the

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

main body of the society in which it lives can constitute a strong enough basis for the justification of my work or of any work of art, for that matter. I hold that personality is an attribute of which any one and every one may boast. It is there whether we want it or not. I hold that such a method of justification may only result in that very baleful end from which we are all striving to escape; namely, it will end in the vanity fair of personalities struggling to overpower each other. I see nothing but confusion and social and mental disaster on this road.

But, there is something else at the artist's disposal to justify his work; and this is when the artist in his art is led by an idea of which he believes that it epitomises not only what he himself feels and looks forward to as an individual, but what the collective human mind of his time feels and aspires towards, but cannot yet express.

As such he is a fore-runner of some development in the mentality of human society and though his idea may or may not eventually prevail over other ideas of his time or of the future, it nevertheless is performing a function without which no progress is possible. This is my road and the purpose of this paper is to explain as concisely as my time permits the fundamentals of the idea which I profess and which I would call—The Idea of Constructive Realism.

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

My art is commonly known as the art of Constructivism. Actually the word Constructivism is a misnomer. The word Constructivism has been appropriated by one group of constructive artists in the 1920's who demanded that art should liquidate itself. They denied any value to easel-painting, to sculpture, in fine, to any work of art in which the artist's purpose was to convey ideas or emotions for their own sake. They demanded from the artist, and particularly from those who were commonly called constructivists that they should use their talents for construction of material values, namely, in building useful objects, houses, chairs, tables, stoves, etc. being materialist in their philosophy and Marxist in their politics, they could not see in a work of art anything else but a pleasurable occupation cherished in a decadent capitalistic society and totally useless, even harmful in the new society of communism. My friends and myself were strongly opposed to that peculiar trend of thought. I did not and do not share the opinion that art is just another game or another pleasure to the artist's heart. I believe that art has a specific function to perform in the mental and social structure of human life. I believe that art is the most immediate and most effective means of communication between the members of human society. I believe art has a supreme vitality equal only to the supremacy of



### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

life itself and that it, therefore, reigns over all man's creations.

It should be apparent from the foregoing that I thus ascribe to art a function of a much higher value and put it on a much broader plane than that somewhat loose and limited one we are used to when we say: painting, sculpture, music, etc. I denominate by the word art the specific and exclusive faculty of man's mind to conceive and represent the world without and within him in form and by means of artfully constructed images. Moreover, I maintain that this faculty predominates in all the processes of our mental and physical orientation in this world, it being impossible for our minds to perceive or arrange or act upon our world in any other way but through this construction of an ever-changing and yet coherent chain of images. Furthermore, I maintain that these mentally constructed images are the very essence of the reality of the world which we are searching for.

When I say images I do not mean images in the platonic sense,—not as reflections or shadows of some reality behind these constructed images of our minds and senses but the images themselves. Any talk and reference to a higher, to a purer, to a more exact reality which is supposed to be beyond these images, I take as a chase after illusions unless and until some image has been

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

constructed by our mind about it to make it appear on the plane of our consciousness in some concrete and coherent form: tangible, visible, imageable, perceptible.

Obviously such a process as I visualize in our mental activity is manifestly a characteristic attribute of art. Consequently I go so far as to maintain that all the other constructions of our mind, be they scientific, philosophic or technical, are but arts disguised in the specific form peculiar to these particular disciplines. I see in human mind the only sovereign of this immeasurable and measurable universe of ours. It is the creator and the creation.

Since man started to think he has been persuading himself of the existence somewhere, somehow, in some form, of an external reality which we are supposed to search for, to approach, to approximate and to reproduce. Scientists as well as artists have obediently followed that persuasion. The scientists have made great strides in their search; the artists, however, stopped at the gates of our sensual world and by calling it naturalism they remain in the belief that they are reproducing the true reality. Little, it seems to me, do these artists know how shallow their image of reality must appear to the scientific mind of today; to the mind which conveys to us nowadays an image of a reality where there is no difference,

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

no boundaries between a grain of sand and a drop of water; a flash of electricity and the fragrance of a tree. Both, however, claim reality and I shall be the last to deny them the truth of their assertions; both are artists and both are telling the truth. But neither of them have the right to claim exclusive truth for their image.

The external world, this higher and absolute reality, supposedly detached from us, may exist or may not—so long as our mind has not constructed a specific image about it, it may just as well be considered non-existent. I know only one indestructible fact, here and now, that I am alive and so are you. But what this mysterious process which is called life actually is, beyond that image which I and you are constructing about it, is unknown and unknowable.

It may easily be seen that it would have been indeed a source of unbearable suffering to us, a source of hopeless despair, should the human mind resign to this ignorance of its universe leaving its destiny to that something unknown, unknowable. The history of mankind, the history of its material and mental development, reassures us, however, on that point. It shows us that mankind never has and never will resign to that state of total ignorance and inexorable fatality. Mind knows that once born we are alive, and once alive we are in the midst of a stream of creation

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

and once in it we are not only carried by it, but we are capable to influence its course. With indefatigable perseverance man is constructing his life giving a concrete and neatly shaped image to that which is supposed to be unknown and which he alone, through his constructions, does constantly let be known. He creates the images of his world, he corrects them and he changes them in the course of years, of centuries. To that end he utilizes great plants, intricate laboratories, given to him with life; the laboratory of his senses and the laboratory of his mind; and through them he invents, construes and constructs ways and means in the form of images for his orientation in this world of his. And what is known to us as acquisition of knowledge is therefore nothing else but the acquisition of skill in constructing and improving that grandiose artifice of images which in their entirety, represents to us the universe,—our universe. Whatever we discover with our knowledge is not something lying outside us, not something which is a part of some higher, constant, absolute reality which is only waiting for us to discover it . . . but, we discover exactly that which we put into the place where we make the discovery. We have not discovered electricity, x-rays, the atom and thousands of other phenomena and processes—we have made them. They are images of our own

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

construction. After all, it is not long ago that electricity to us was the image of a sneezing and ferocious god—after that it became a current, later on it became a wave, today it is a particle which behaves like a wave which, in its turn, behaves like a particle—tomorrow its image will shrink to the symbol of some concise mathematical formula. What is it all if not an ever-changing chain of images, ever true and ever real so long as they are in use—both the old one which we discard and the new which we construe; and when we discard them we do so not because they are untrue or unreal, but because at a certain moment they lose their efficacy for our new orientation in this world and do not fit with other images, newly construed and newly created. The very question which we often ask ourselves, whether these phenomena were there before our knowing about them, or whether they are a part of some constant reality independent of our mind—such questions are themselves a product of our mind and they are characteristic for us so long as we remain in the state of being alive—they lose all sense and significance the moment we can face a state of nature where mind is not.

These are the fundamental principles of the philosophy of Constructive Realism which I profess. This philosophy is not a guidance for my work, it is a justification for it. It helps me to



## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

reconcile myself to the world around me in everyday activities and thoughts; it helps me also to disentangle the complex snarl of contemporary ideas, inimical to each other and, which is more important, it may give you the reason as it does to me for what I am doing in my art and why I am doing it in the way I do it.

But perhaps at this point I ought to be somewhat more explicit.

If you have followed me up till now you may perhaps grant me that I am thinking consequently when I claim that I, as an artist, have the right to discard images of the world which my predecessors have created before me and search for new images which touch upon other sights of life and nature other rhythm corresponding to new mental and sensual processes living in us to-day and that by representing these new images I have the right to claim that they are images of reality.

I say, indeed, with what right is the scientist allowed to discard views of the world which were so useful to mankind for so many thousands of years and replace them by new images entirely different from the old? With what right is the scientist allowed it and the artist not—and why? Take, for instance, our ancestors' anthropomorphic image of the world. For thousands of years it was serving them well in their every-



### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

day life and in their forward growth. That image of the world was populated by creatures who were replicas of ourselves. The sun and the earth and all the furniture of heaven were in the power of gods whose countenances were like our own. Accordingly their arts and their sciences (such as they were) their religions, their cosmologies, all were based on this anthropomorphic conception of the world without and within them. Yet it was taken for granted that when the mechanistic conception of the universe replaced the anthropomorphic one, it was quite all right; and when now our contemporary sciences are developing an image of the world so entirely different from both the previous ones as to appear to us almost absurd, incomprehensible to common sense, we are again willing to take it—we have already accepted it; we have gotten familiar with a world in which forces are permitted to become mass and matter is permitted to become light; a world which is pictured to us as a conglomeration of oscillating electrons, protons, neutrons, particles which behave like waves, which in their turn behave like particles—. If the scientist is permitted to picture to us an image of an electron which under certain conditions has less than zero energy (in common language, it means that it weighs less than nothing) and if he is permitted to see behind this simple common table, an image of the

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

curvature of space—why, may I ask, is not the contemporary artist to be permitted to search for and bring forward an image of the world more in accordance with the achievements of our developed mind, even if it is different from the image presented in the paintings and sculptures of our predecessors?

I don't deny them their right to go on painting their images; I don't even deny that their images *are* real and true; the only thing I maintain is that the artists cannot go on forever painting the views from their window and pretending that this is all there is in the world, because it is not. There are many aspects in the world, unseen, unfelt and unexperienced, which have to be conveyed and we have the right to do it no less than they. It is, therefore, obvious that my question is purely rhetoric.

There is nothing whatsoever of any sense or validity to warrant the demand of some of those self-appointed public critics of ours, that unless we stick to the ancient, to the naive, anthropomorphic representation of our emotions, we are not doing serious art; we are escapists, decorators, abstractionists, murderers of art, dead men ourselves. Little do these critics know how preposterous, naive their demand is in a time and in a world entirely different from what they want

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

us to represent, and which they themselves have already meekly accepted without realizing it.

There is, however, one argument which could be brought up by our adversaries had they known what they are talking about and it is this:

It may be argued that when the scientist is advancing a new conception or a new image as we call it, of the universe or of life, he takes it for granted that this new image he is presenting must needs first be verified; it has to be tested by our experience as unmistakable facts. Only then may he claim validity for his image in the scientific picture of the world he is constructing. Whereas you artists, the argument may go on, in your sort of constructions, are expecting us, the public, to take your image for granted, take it as valid without reference to any given fact except that it is a construction of your mind. This is a serious argument, at least on the surface, and my answer to it is this:

First of all, the so-authoritative word verification should not be taken too seriously—after all verification is nothing else but an appeal to that very tribunal which issued the verdict in the first place. In our ordinary processes of jurisprudence we would never dream of letting the defendant be his own prosecutor but in this case, we seem to do so without noticing the trap into which we

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

are falling. But let us leave that for the moment; I shall come back to it presently.

The reference I so often make here to science and my claim for the artists' right should not be understood as meaning that I consider visual art and science exactly the same thing. I am not claiming my work to be a work of science; I am no scientist and I do not know more of science than anyone who has gone through the routine of the usual university education. I have learned to read the scientists' books and I presume that I understand their meaning, but I certainly cannot do their job. There is no more mathematics in my work than is anatomy in a figure of Michael Angelo and I have nothing but contempt for those artists who masquerade their works as scientific by titling them with algebraic formulas. This is plain profanation of both Art and Science. I may quote from an editorial statement of mine published in "Circle" in 1937, London: "Art and Science are two different streams which rise from the same creative source and flow into the same ocean of common human culture, but the currents of these streams flow in different beds. There is a difference between the art of science and the visual or poetic arts. Science teaches, explores, comprehends, reasons and proves. Art asserts, art acts, art makes believe. The force of art lies in its immediate influence on human psychol-

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

ogy, in its impulsive contagiousness: art being a creation of man does recreate man." In closing the quotation I can, of course, add that Science too does recreate man, but I maintain that it cannot do it without the help of some visual sensual or poetic art.

Science in conveying a new image or conception can but state it; it can make it cogent by its own means but, it cannot, however, by its own means alone make this image an organic part of our consciousness, of our perceptions; it cannot bring that new image in the stream of our emotions and transfer it into a sensual experience. It is only through the means of our visual or poetic arts that this image can be experienced and incorporated in the frame of our attitude toward this world.

After all, the minds of our ancestors have in their time created a cosmology of their own, they have created an image of a single god in heaven to which even some of our scientists today still adhere, but it is not the mere proclamation and reasoning about the existence of such a god that made this image into a fact. It is the prayer of the poet who made the primitive man humiliate himself in an ecstasy of propitiation to that god; it is the music of the psalms, the edifice of the temple, the choir and the holy image painted on the icon and the liturgical performance at the

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

holy services—all acts of pure visual and poetic art; it is this which incorporates the religious images of our forefathers into their life affecting their behavior and moulding their mentality. Science has long ago told us that the image of the sun rising in the east is sheer nonsense, that it is the earth and ourselves who are turning towards the sun, making it appear to rise; yet this new conception does not seem to have left any trace at all in the rhythm of our everyday experience even now. Our poets are still chirping happily about the sun rising in the east; and why should they not? Theirs is still a valid image; it is real and it is poetic; but so is the new one no less real, no less poetic, no less worthy to serve as an image and be incorporated in our new vision.

In an age when the scientific eye of man is looking through matter into a fascinating all-embracing image of space—time as the very essence of our consciousness and of our universe, the old anthropomorphic image inherited by us from our primordial ancestry is still in full reign in the major part of our contemporary imagery. So long as our contemporary artists are incapable to see in a mountain anything but the image of some crouching naked figure, and so long as the sculptors are sweating in carving at various angles, this very graven image, keeping themselves in the state of mind almost identical with that of



### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

a Papuan or a Hottentot, the sculptor cannot claim to have acquired a new vision of the world outside him or of the world in him and science with all its achievements in advanced creations cannot possibly claim to have incorporated its new image of the world into the mentality of mankind. It is only through the new plastic vision of the coming artist, advanced in his mind, that science can ever hope to achieve this. I think that the constructive artist of today is qualified for just that task. He has found the means and the methods to create new images and to convey them as emotional manifestations in our everyday experience. This means being shapes, lines, colors, forms, are not illusory nor are they abstractions; they are a factual force and their impact on our senses is as real as the impact of light or of an electrical shock. This impact can be verified just as any other natural phenomenon. Shapes, colors and lines speak their own language. They are events in themselves and in an organized construction they become beings—their psychological force is immediate, irresistible and universal to all species of mankind; not being the result of a convention as words are, they are unambiguous and it is, therefore, that their impact can influence the human psyche; it can break or mold it, it exults, it depresses, elates or makes desperate; it can bring order where there was

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

confusion and it can disturb and exasperate where there was an order. That is why I use these elemental means for my expression, but far be it from me to advocate that a constructive work of art should consist merely of an arrangement of these elemental means for no other purpose than to let them speak for themselves. I am constantly demanding from myself and keep on calling to my friends, not to be satisfied with that gratifying arrangement of elemental shapes, colors and lines for the mere gratification of arrangement; I demand that they shall remain only means for conveying a well-organized and clearly defined image—not just some image, any image, but a new and constructive image by which I mean that which by its very existence as a plastic vision should provoke in us the forces and the desires to enhance life, assert it and assist its further development.

I cannot help rejecting all repetitions of images already done, already worn out and ineffective. I cannot help searching for new images and this I do, not for the sake of their novelty but for the sake of finding an expression of the new outlook on the world around me and the new insight into the forces of life and nature in me.

We are all living in a section of history of mankind when a new civilization is being forged.

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

Many of us know it and more of us are talking about it, but few visualize what the image of that new civilization is. The majority of our artists and poets of today stand in a violent revolt against the new civilization. Many of them see in it a curse and a nightmare. They prefer to look for shelter in the civilization of the cave-man with all the consequences involved in a cave mentality. None of them realizes the very fact that the so-called new civilization is not here even in blue print. What we are living in is not the civilization we are striving for, and it is not a matter of our rejection or acceptance of this new civilization—it is a matter of creating it and defining its image clearly. Civilizations do not come to us from heaven in ready-made assortments to choose from. Civilizations are constructions of man; they are the result of a collective effort in which the artist has always played and still has to play, no mean part. We have to face this inevitable fact, that a new civilization must be built because the old one is going to pieces. We shall be responsible for every trait in the future structure of this new civilization—we, here and now, the artist, the scientist as well as the common man, are the builders of its edifice. How can we succeed in our task if we do not even try, nay much more, if we are not even allowed to try, to clarify to ourselves what its image shall be, what order and

## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

structure should prevail in this new civilization we are having to build.

We shall be heading straight into disaster if we take it for granted that the main characteristic of the new civilization will consist alone in the material improvement of our surroundings; that the airplane and the refrigerator, the fluorescent light and the comfortable speed of our travels, the atomic clouds in our skies and the babel of our sky-scraping cities, that these are the traits of our coming civilization—we can be no further from the real image of it than by imagining it in this way. It is the man and his mentality, it is the trend of our aspirations, our ideals; it is our attitude toward mankind and the world which we have to acquire if we want to survive and to build something more propitious for the continuance of our life than what we have done up till now. It is the creation of new values, moral, social and aesthetic, which will constitute the main task in the construction of the new civilization. It is the establishment of new norms, by which I mean modes of thinking, feeling and behaving not in accordance with the wanton whim of an individual but corresponding to a constructed new image of man's relationship to mankind—it is all that, plus the reorganization of our external environment, the creation of the world we are liv-

### THREE LECTURES ON MODERN ART

ing with in our homes and in our cities; it is all this which will make our civilization.

The new forces which the human mind is placing in our power are vast and destructive as any force always is and will be; but in the command of man these same forces can be harnessed for constructive ends as always was the case since the reign of man in this world of ours began, and as it always will be. It is my firm belief that our new civilization will be constructive or it will not be at all. And as a constructive artist I believe that the former will be the case. Being satisfied that we constructive artists are capable of facing the task of building this new civilization of ours, I claim the right to participate in the construction of it; both materially and spiritually.

I could just as well have finished with that, but I hold it appropriate at this moment to add something specific in order to be heard not only by this audience, but by all who are giving so much attention, wanted or unwanted, to the so-called modern arts, to which ours also belongs. It is perhaps the only thing in all of my exposition of which I am convinced that most of my comrades will agree with me.

I want to issue a warning to all those who hold the chains of power over the world today; to the self-appointed dictators as well as to the properly elected statesmen; to the ordained commissars as



## ON CONSTRUCTIVE REALISM

well as to the chosen heads of political departments; to the man in the street as well as to the self-appointed representatives of public opinion—I, the artist, the pushed and battered artist of to-day, warn them all that they will do better and will get more out of me if they leave me alone to do my work. They will never succeed, no matter how much they try, to enslave my mind without extinguishing it. I will never enlist in the suite of heralds and trumpeters of their petty glories and bestial quarrels. They may vilify my ideas, they may slander my work, they may chase me from one country to another, they may perhaps, eventually succeed in starving me, but I shall never, never conform to their ignorance, to their prejudices.

We artists may dispute and argue amongst ourselves about ideologies and ideals—but nothing will more potently bind us together than the revolt against the blind forces trying to make us do what we do not believe is worth doing.





## *Index*

- Abstract forms—9
- Abstract painters—10
- Abstraction—22
- aeroplane—9
- Aeschylus—16
- America—VI, 1, 3
- architecture—17
- Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy—25
- Armory Show—1, 2, 4, 5
- Arp, Hans—54
- Art, The, of Spiritual Harmony—54
- Art, Chinese—12
- Art forms—9
- Art, function of—12
- Art, history of—9
- Art, understanding of—11
- arts, industrial—12
- artist's right—79
- Association Populaire des Amis des Musées—40
- Atlantic—22
- atoms—73
- Author Meets the Critics—7
  
- Barcelona—54
- Barr, Jr., Alfred H.—15
- Barr, Alfred H., Jr.—15
- black magic—8
- Blavatsky, Madame—7
- Blue Circle, The—21, 23
- Boston—3
- Bouguereau—16
- Bride, The—45
- brotherhood of man—7, 10
- Byzantine painters—10
- Byzantium—33, 34
  
- California—6
- Campendonk—26, 27, 51
- Canada—4
- Cassatt, Mary—3
  
- Century magazine—2
- Cézanne—21, 40, 41
- Chicago Art Institute—21
- Chinese—13
- Christ—8
- Christ Child—20
- civilization—84, 85, 86
- Collection of the Société Anonyme—43, 46, 52, 55, 56, 65
- Congress—2
- Constructive realism—63, 65, 68, 74
- Constructivism—69, 86
- constructivist—41, 45
- Correggio—21
- Courbet—44
- Craven, Thomas—6, 10
- Crowninshield, Frank—2
- cubic forms—2
- Cubism—17
- cubists—2, 41
  
- Dada—45
- Dadaistic approach—11
- Dancer, The—61
- Dante—16
- David—16
- Davies, Arthur B.—1
- Davis, Stuart—7
- De Stijl—51
- De Zayas—15
- Dejeuner—55
- Doesburg—51
- Dreier, Katherine S.—VI, 1, 19, 29, 58, 65
- Duchamp, Marcel—VI, 5, 7, 21, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 49, 50, 51
- duty—2
  
- Egyptians—15
- El Greco—13, 18, 19, 21
- electricity—73

## INDEX

- Eliot, T. S.—35, 37, 39, 40,  
     49, 50  
 England—1  
 English—17  
 Europe—1, 4, 38  
  
 Faber & Faber—38  
 fluidity—21  
 form—22, 82  
 Form in Space—26  
 Fox Trot—52  
 France—1, 2  
 Freedom of the Brush—22  
 futurists—41; Italian, 9  
  
 Gabo, Naum—26, 41, 45, 46,  
     47, 49, 50, 51, 59, 63  
 Germany—1  
 Gibbings, T. H. Robsjohn—6, 7  
 Giotto—10, 24, 25  
 Greeks—15  
 Gris, Juan—51, 53  
  
 Hamilton, Professor—33  
 Hassam, Child—3  
 "Haystack"—3  
 Hitler—11  
 Holland—1  
 Homer—38  
 Hottentot—82  
 Houghton-Mifflin & Co.—4  
  
 icon—80  
 Impressionists—1-3, 13, 20, 40  
 Ingres—16  
  
 Joan of Arc—10  
 Joseph—20, 21  
  
 Kandinsky, Wasili—20, 21, 22,  
     23, 54  
 King, Kulpah—12  
 Klee, Paul—54  
 Knopf, Alfred A.—7  
  
 L'Apam—40  
 Léger, Fernand—26, 28, 51  
 Le Musée Vivant—40  
 Le Renversement—56  
 Leonardo—7  
 light—40  
  
 linear perspective—20  
 lines—82, 83  
 London—79  
  
 MacMillan and Co.—33  
 Madonna—20  
 Magazine of Art—7  
 Magdalenian draughtsmen—38  
 Malewitch, Kasimir—51  
 Marxist—69  
 Matisse—45  
 mechanistic conception of the  
     universe—76  
 Metropolitan Museum—18  
 Metzinger—51  
 Miller, Margaret—7  
 Michael Angelo—79  
 miracle—8  
 Miro, Joan—54, 56  
 Model for a Fountain—26  
 Model for Monument for an  
     Observatory—29  
 Model of a Column—46  
 Modern Art (Thomas Craven)  
     —6  
 Mona Lisa's Mustache  
     (Gibbings)—6, 10  
 Mondrian, Piet—51, 52  
 Monet—3  
 monotony—24  
 Montroig—54  
 Monument for an Airport—60  
 Mooney, Edmund L.—6  
 Moore—26  
 Motion—22  
 Museum of Modern Art—VI,  
     26, 47  
 Museum of Non-Objective Art  
     —23  
 music—17  
  
 National Gallery—33  
 Nativity—18, 19  
 naturalism—71  
 Nature—16  
 New York—3, 5, 6, 47  
 nihilism—45  
 Nude Descending the Stairs—  
     21, 45  
  
 occultism—8  
 Oneness—24

# INDEX

- Paderewsky—8
- Papuan—82
- Paris—3
- Peking—12
- Personality—66, 68
- Pevsner—26, 47, 51, 60, 61
- philosophy—10; study of, 8
- Picasso—15, 16, 17
- Picasso: 50 Years of His Art—15
- Pieta, The—24
- portraiture—13
- Quinn, John—1, 2
- radio—9
- Ray, Man—5, 6
- Realistic forms—9
- Realistic painting—10
- Red Cat—26, 27
- religion, study of—8
- Renaissance—1, 4, 40; painters, 17
- Revolving Glass at Rest—42
- Revolving Glass in Motion—43
- Rhythm—22
- Rich—21
- Russia—1, 11, 51, 65
- Sailing to Byzantium—33, 34
- Sawyer, Charles S.—VI
- School of Art, (Yale)—15
- Schwab, Prof. Christoph—4
- Schwitters, Kurt—51
- Science—79; study of, 8
- sculpture—12, 26
- Shakespeare—38
- shapes—82, 83
- Smith, Logan Pearsall—33
- Société Anonyme—II, VI, 36, 39, 41, 42; Collection, 40, 50, 53, 54, 57, 58, 61; Exhibition, 33; Museum of Modern Art, 5, 6, 65; Yale University Art Gallery, 26
- Sophocles—16
- Space—17, 22
- Speicher, Eugene—22
- Sphere—59
- surrealism—41
- Sweden—1
- Sweeney, James Johnson—31
- Switzerland—1
- tariff—2
- Theosophical Society—7
- Time—17
- Tower, the—33
- trade-agreement—2
- Tradition—31
- Tradition and the Individual Talent, Selected Essays—38
- Trowbridge Lecture—1, 31, 63
- Truman, President—11
- Unity—24
- Van Gogh—3; Madame du Quesne, 4
- Van Horn—4
- Velasquez—16
- Villon, Jacques—51, 55
- Washington—2
- Winding Stairs and other Poems—33
- Wordsworth—16
- x-rays—73
- Yale—4, 15, 39, 58
- Yale University Art Gallery—II, VI, 1, 27, 28, 31, 42, 43, 46, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 61, 63, 65
- World War, First—44
- Yeats, William Butler—33, 36, 45, 49
- Zwei Weltern—II









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